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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is hereby circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Human rights situation in Morocco's Rif Region

In October 2016 the biggest protest movement in Morocco since Arab Spring erupted after a fish merchant was crushed to death in a garbage truck as he tried to retrieve the fish confiscated by policemen for being caught out of season. The tragic event has happened in the city of al-Hoceima in Northern Morocco. In the days after the death of the merchant, furious protesters in the often neglected nearby mountainous Rif region have founded the Hirak al-Rif movement.

The Rif has seen a history of repression and neglect. The region, which is mostly inhabited by non-arabic indigenous Amazigh people, has suffered since decades from strong unemployment rates particularly among young people. The expansion of illegal narcotic production and its criminalization has led to more emigration to Europe. The brutal crushing of a popular uprising in the Rif in the year 1958 has created a feeling of injustice and has led to a distrust of the state among the inhabitants of the mountain range. This difficult relationship with the authorities has caused more neglect and the denial of development by Moroccan authorities.

Many migrants from Rif, now living in Europe, have been supportive to the Hirak movement. But in their fight against widespread corruption and neglect, the protesters also raised much support in other bigger cities in Morocco. The authorities were not successful in trying to present Hirak as a movement mostly supported by funds from people in abroad. Many Amazigh flags in public protests have documented the strong local support of the protest movement.

From the beginning of the protests, Hirak has drafted a list of demands, including the demilitarization of the region, the right to a fair trial, more infrastructure development, investment and the construction of a hospital and a university. These social and political demands gained much support among the local population, which especially has appreciated the massive criticism of corruption expressed by Hirak.

In May 2017, the deliberate arrest of the Hirak leaders and many protesters dealt a blow to the protest movement, which had been quite successful since October 2016 but was mostly contained to the Rif region. Only 41 arrested protesters have been granted a royal pardon in the summer of 2017.

At least 400 arrested protesters or Hirak-supporters still are awaiting their trials. The Hirak-leader Nasser Zefzafi remains in prison and had been put on trial with 53 other activists. They are facing long imprisonments because they are accused of undermining state security, murder and promoting looting by their public protests. On December 11, 2017, a young protester has been condemned to 12 years imprisonment, 20 other activists were sentenced to prison terms between two and three years. On December 18, 2017, six other activists have got prison terms between two and four years.

The protesters are treated as criminals or terrorists, the excessive and deliberate prison terms are not reflecting that they only were committed to use their freedom of opinion to raise criticism against corruption and neglect and to push for social reforms.

By all means Moroccan authorities have tried to intimidate national and international journalists in order to restrict reporting on the protest movement and its activities. Journalists have been arrested or deported to abroad to limit the media coverage on Hirak.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the Moroccan Government:

- to immediately release all Hirak activists or supporters from custody and to stop the criminal investigations against them,
- to ensure freedom of assembly, opinion and press in the Rif region,

- to start discussions with the Hirak leadership on a peaceful solution of the conflict and on the implementation of their demands.